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 Book Review

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Against the Crisis of time: Portraits of conservative thinkers



Daniel Fühling (Hg.)

***Gegen die Krise der Zeit: Kon-
 servative Denker im Portrait***

Ares Verlag, Graz, 2013, 280 p.

It is safe to say that the publishing house Ares from Graz is

among the rare few dedicated to the publishing of conservative literature. In their catalogue, we can thus find re-issues of classical conservative texts (such as Spengler's *The Hour of Decision*), but also books by prominent post-war conservative authors, including Caspar von Schrenck-Notzing, Hans-Dietrich Sander or Friedrich Romig. On its beaten track, the publisher has already released two collections featuring profiles of famous conservatives. These are: *Conservative Profile: Ideas and Praxis in Politics among Radetzky, Karl Kraus and Alois Mock*, edited by Ulrich Zellenberg and *Conservatism in Austria: Strands, Ideas, Persons and Associations from the Beginning to the Present*, co-edited by Ulrich Zellenberg and Robert Rill. Both volumes primarily examined conservatism in Austria, reviewing the ideas of major Austrian conservative thinkers, but also policies of the House of Habsburg, conservative parties

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and associations. It was in these footsteps that the volume: *Against the Crisis of Time: Portraits of Conservative Thinkers*, edited by Daniel Fühling, was delivered. However, this collection is also different from its precedents. First, it is no longer only about Austrian conservatives, or even solely about European authors. We can find essays on Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, Nicolás Gómez Dávila, Ivan Ilyin, Russell Kirk, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Michael Oakeshott, Julius Evola... and thus, the book also takes into account British, Russian and Latin American traditions of conservatism. Among the Austrians profiled are Johannes Messner, Hans Sedlmayr, Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner and Othmar Spann in separate essays, while Erika Voegelin's thought is reviewed together with Leo Strauss' in the same text. If we add essays on Arnold Gehlen, Ernst Jünger, Günther Maschke, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, Edgar Julius Jung, Günther Rohrmoser, Wilhelm Röpke, Carl Schmitt and Robert Spaemann, we can note that German-speaking conservatives remain overwhelmingly featured. The second point that sets this collection apart from the previous ones is its time scope. More specifically, while the earlier two collections referred to the time from the "beginning" of conservatism in Austria "to the present",

or "from Radetzky to Mock", this volume captures only 20th century conservatives, both pre- and post-war. The third difference from the previous collections pertains to the selection of the authors featured. While previous collections included politicians, officers, artists or clerics who often did not have much to do with politics, nor did they participate in the framing of conservative thought, we now see persons who, to varying degrees, are all distinct political thinkers.

As the editor points out, in the selection of contributors special attention was paid to their strong knowledge of the subject, or ideas of the author they portrayed, as well as their empathy for the topic, as opposed to simply paraphrasing another person's ideas. In this respect, it is fair to say that this is a book on conservatives written by conservatives or at least authors who are pro-conservative. Hence the authors, apart from the afore-mentioned Zellenberg, also include Sebastian Maass, Hanns Pichler, Michael Wladyka, Dirk Budde and others.

In his editorial, Daniel Fühling, makes reference to difficulties experienced in determining conservatism and the conservative position and in this context, he underscores the supervicial spirit of our era which, with very

few exceptions, prevails among the academia and the public. Also, the editor does not disguise his intention that this collection should attempt to rehabilitate conservative thinking. He argues that the present era is not only unfavourable for conservatives, but we are witnessing the intentional discreditation of the classical and Christian traditions, or cultivation of prejudice against conservatism. The term “conservatism” given in the introduction is rather broadly defined. The editor chose to do so in order to include different representatives of the conservative world view, while accepting the historical tensions among the authors featured. Therefore, in this volume we can find such diametrically different authors as Russell Kirk and Julius Evola, Michael Oakshott and Ernst Jünger, Wilhelm Röpke and Ivan Ilyin.

The definition of the term „conservatism“ assumes that this is a school of thought emerging at the time of the the French Revolution as a reaction to the rationalist, unhistorical and anti-life philosophy of enlightenment in all its variations. For two hundred years now, conservatives have been fighting with the hubris of the modern man and his chronic lack of touch with reality. It is clear that the editor is more interested in conservative thinking associated with the tradition

of the conservative revolution, which seeks to „create things that are worth preserving“ as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck put it, than in conservatism that advocates for the *status quo* and yearns for by-gone times.

Criticism that the modern age is out of touch with reality, in Fühling’s opinion, implies the question about the essence of man. In the definition of conservatism, the editor raises the anthropological question, stating that the conservative worldview regards man as a whole, without reducing him to some specific aspects. Hence, for conservatives, man is not only a material, biological or political being, but above all *homo religiosus*. Beyond that, conservative anthropology views man based on the anti-individualistic principle, as a community being. In other words, man, with all his characteristics, is always viewed from the conservative perspective as part of the larger body of community, family, nation... Also, conservativist anthropological realism will perceive man as an imperfect, deficient and weak being that is evil-prone. On this issue, conservatism has always stood in opposition to all egalitarian ideas on human equality. Another important point of conservative anthropology is the belief in human inequality. Contrary to the opinion that regards con-

servatism solely as an inert and unreflexive insistence on keeping things as they are and refusal of any change, Führung thinks that conservatism is inseparable from the perception of life as a struggle which may not necessarily pay off in the earthly life. With regard to the first characteristic of conservative anthropology that man is *homo religiosus*, conservatives struggle is not aimed at trivia, but at eternal values such as family, nation and God.

In this way, Führung artfully bypasses the formalist perception of conservatism that any insistence on preserving a given state of affairs is conservative, or the debate whether conservatism implies the wish for return to the (better) past, as well as getting involved in outlining every single conservative canon and theme. Instead, with conservative anthropology in the foreground, it is possible to accept as conservative different visions of order framed on the same anthropological premises.

Given this broadly formulated definition of the conservative position, the editor emphasizes that all authors included in this collection have not lost any of their relevance even today. The authors portrayed should remind us of the traditional foundations of a sound order.

However, the collection cannot be said to provide very detailed

profiles of authors, since essays hardly exceed twenty pages. Thus the reader who is already familiar with the subject, will hardly find any new or unknown information. But, this was not after all the intention of the editor, who attempted to provide a survey of the 20th century conservatism, to introduce some neglected and forgotten authors to the public, to stimulate reflection and prompt further reading, rather than elaborate individual ideas.